

The Visitor

Devoted to the Interests of Agricultural Education in Minnesota Schools

Vol. LV

January, 1968

No. 1

OCCUPATIONAL CHOICE, MOTIVATION, AND PERCEPTUAL PSYCHOLOGY

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The occupational choices available to students studying vocational agriculture today are many. This is in considerable contrast to the single choice available formerly under a more restrictive national policy. When farming was the only bona fide occupational objective, teachers of vocational agriculture perceived the occupational choice of their students to be a dichotomous one. The question was "should or should not the student plan to become a farmer?" The choice was theoretically made prior to enrollment of the student. When the student appeared in the vocational agriculture class, presumably he had enrolled to study production agriculture as an occupational objective. It became the teacher's responsibility to ascertain whether or not that choice was well founded. At that point, the occupational guidance responsibility of the teacher ended except for the possible selection of a particular kind of farming.

The student who is eligible to study vocational agriculture today will be doing so because he is interested in agriculture, which may or may not be farming. A clientele with more varied interests will be enrolling in vocational agriculture classes to obtain the basic background and the knowledge of production agriculture which is required by most states as a prerequisite for pursuing other occupations in agriculture. The multiplicity of agricultural occupations from which today's students in high school may choose makes it imperative that teachers of vocational agriculture and others make the adjustments necessitated by this change.

Changes Required

The most obvious change which the teacher of vocational agriculture can make is to provide pertinent occupational information to his students in a systematic procedure. Usually the teacher of vocational agriculture is the best qualified person in the school to provide infor-

mation about opportunities in agricultural occupations. The teacher of vocational agriculture can also provide the guidance counselor with information about the wide range of occupations in agriculture and the needs and opportunities in these occupations.

The recent U. S. Office of Education requirement that an occupational choice for each student studying vocational agriculture "shall be a matter of record in the school" makes it necessary for teachers of vocational agriculture to become involved in the selection of occupations by their students. This involvement is more than listing the official categories of occupations on the chalkboard and having the students pick one. Before a student can be expected to make an occupational choice, he must become acquainted with the choices which are possible.

The preparation of the typical teacher of vocational agriculture is such that he must limit his guidance and counseling function to a certain extent. He can, however, and often must assist the guidance counselor who usually has a higher pupil load than is recommended. A counselor shortage makes it necessary for the teacher of agriculture to work with the guidance counselor and assume more duties in the guidance and counseling of students than he would otherwise. In addition to acquainting students with occupational opportunities, an analysis of interests and an assessment of their aptitudes and vocational abilities is necessary. The interests, aptitudes and vocational abilities must be discussed with the student so that he may have some concept of the occupational level which he may be able to attain.

Perceptions and Motivation

Many writers and teachers in agricultural education seem to be unduly concerned that the occupational choice of students be made realistic, even at a young age. They ask "how can we inject more realism into occupational

Vol. LV THE VISITOR No. 1

Published quarterly during the calendar year in January, April, July, and October by the Department of Agricultural Education, University of Minnesota, St. Paul, Minnesota 55101.

Second class postage paid at St. Paul, Minnesota.

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decisions?" They speak of the fantasy of occupational choice, especially among younger students. They often cite an example of the boy who is small in stature and has little financial backing but still thinks he can become a farmer.

Occupational goals are naturally less realistic in the beginning. These goals should gradually become more realistic. Occupational choices which are considered in the realm of fantasy should not be snuffed out immediately with the harsh water of realism, but should be dampened gradually with the facts in order to retain the source of motivation. The student who perceives himself working in a particular occupation at a future time is motivated to learn the requirements for entry and necessary knowledge and skills for that occupation. Whether or not he will eventually work in the particular occupation does not alter the intensity of his motivation. A student with a slightly unrealistic goal has a source of motivation and is likely to learn more than a student who is forced to discard his unrealistic goal and be without an occupational orientation for a long period of time.

Perceptual Psychology and Occupational Choice

The choice of an occupation is a continuous process which, in this country, does not have to become final until very late in the student's formal education. The process of occupational selection is usually a succession of goals. It is occupational exploration.

The choice of an occupation depends upon: 1) how the student perceives the occupation, 2) how he perceives himself, and 3) the interrelationship of these two. As the student perceives himself becoming more qualified, he changes his occupational goal to one requiring more of the particular characteristics which he now sees in himself. Teacher educators have no doubt recognized this in prospective teachers who are enrolled in the undergraduate curriculum. A student will come into the office with a rather dejected expression on his face and say,

"I just cannot see myself as a teacher". Perhaps he has all the qualities necessary for success but he does not perceive himself in the role of the teacher. Perhaps he does become convinced to complete student teaching. Afterward he usually has a different perception of himself, and also a different perception of the job of the teacher of agriculture. Understanding how things seem from the student's view point is necessary in order to understand his behavior and be helpful in occupational guidance.

Breadth of Occupational Objectives

The narrowness of occupational objectives for students of high school age in vocational agriculture was of particular concern to teachers and others in agricultural education when the procedure of reporting occupational objectives was being formulated. Many individuals were concerned that the occupation choice would have to be that of a specific job title.

Little harm can come from a narrow occupational choice; these choices change from time to time in the continuous process of occupational selection. The harm can come from planning a curriculum based upon the narrow and often transitory occupational objectives of high school students.

Specialization of Training

The need for a student to specialize increases as he nears the end of his full-time educational pursuit. A rather narrow and final choice of an occupation must be made before this full-time educational pursuit ends. This is necessary in order that the student can specialize sufficiently to have a saleable skill and thus be employable.

Knowing when a student should specialize is dependent upon knowing when he is going to end his full-time education. If the student is going to drop out of school at age 17, he should be preparing for a specific occupation during at least his final year in school. A student who plans to attend a two-year post high school institution would specialize during those two years. The teacher of vocational agriculture must try to ascertain how long the student can be persuaded or encouraged to continue full-time education and then plan the experiences of the student accordingly. Individual study and instruction supplemented by on-the-job training should be used to develop a high degree of student proficiency in a single area during the last one to two years the student remains in school.

It is true that a student's occupational choice should be broad in the beginning, but occupational choices have little meaning to the

student unless he can focus upon a narrow occupational objective. The student must picture a person performing the specific duties of a single job title in order for the objective to be meaningful. Occupational choices may be narrow but not firm. This is an indication of the continuous process leading toward a clarification of the occupational choice the student will finally make.

Socio-Economic Status and Occupational Choice

The additional occupations from which students of vocational agriculture may choose have brought about a problem which was not encountered when farming was the only bona fide occupational objective. The occupation of farming is not associated with any one particular socio-economic class. A person who chooses to be a farmer may become rich, respected and prosperous or he could become one of a lower socio-economic standing. The point is that he is not earmarked socio-economically when he chooses the occupation of farming. The choice of an occupation such as agricultural welder, seed analyst, or agriculture chemical salesman does have some socio-economic implications. Teachers of vocational agriculture need to be aware of the status which is placed upon the various occupations by students and their parents. The teacher can suggest the occupation of farming for a student and this can be all right. If he mentions the job of welder of farm equipment, the boy, and especially his parents, may be angered by knowing that the teacher felt such an occupation was appropriate for their son.

Geography of Occupational Choice

Occupational choices made by students should no longer be confined to only those which exist within the local area. Students seldom move more than fifty miles from their home area to begin farming, and the local vocational agriculture program reflected the nature of farming in the local community. Crops such as tobacco, flax or sunflowers often grown extensively within a hundred miles of the home school district, would not be included in the local course of study. Students travel farther from their homes to engage in off-farm agricultural occupations than they do to engage in farming; therefore, instruction about and for agricultural occupations beyond the local area must be given.

Non-Directive Guidance

The teacher of vocational agriculture must be more student oriented than program oriented to properly perform his occupational guidance role. His guidance and counseling activities

should be client centered. The needs and interests of the student must be placed above any specialized interest and competence of the teacher.

Teachers are responsible for the agriculture program in the school and this responsibility causes them to assume a protective attitude toward the program. Like the manager of a business firm, a teacher might become more concerned about the progress of the total program than with the welfare of the individual students. The teacher of agriculture can easily become too concerned about seeing that the program is growing and that it is creating a favorable image which reflects a favorable image of the teacher. The teacher who does not keep the welfare of the student foremost will soon lose the trust placed in him as a source of unbiased occupational information.

The teacher of vocational agriculture must place the interests and capabilities of the student above his desire to promote any specific occupations. The temptation to push a student into a certain occupation is high when excellent training situations are available in a particular occupation for which students show no interest. This temptation is best averted by first ascertaining the occupational objectives of the student and his desire to participate in a placement employment program, then make arrangements for the training situation.

A vocational agriculture teacher may tend to be biased in his counseling because he has responsibility for the program. Teachers must guard against letting anything have a higher priority than the aspirations of the individual student. Fortunately, vocational agriculture teachers have been conscious of this responsibility and have established themselves as being worthy of the position of trust that they hold. The outcomes of the program are ample and effective testimony to this.

Summary

Occupational education in vocational agriculture has changed from emphasis on the occupation of farming to a multiple choice of several agricultural occupations since the passage of the Morse-Perkins Act of 1963. This change makes it imperative that teachers of vocational agriculture provide instruction relevant to the opportunities and entry requirements in the entire realm of modern agriculture. Teachers are responding to the challenge.

Because of the unfavorable ratio of guidance counselors to students, teachers of vocational agriculture will have to do more than provide information about agricultural occupa-

tions in counseling students concerning their occupational choice. In this connection, certain reference points need to be kept in mind.

Occupational choices of students which seem to be unrealistic to teachers are superior to no occupational choice at all. Motivation is important to learning and is as strong for unrealistic objectives as for realistic ones as long as the student perceives the occupation as being appropriate. Any occupational objective, even though unrealistic, should not be extinguished, but instead should be replaced gradually by a more realistic one through instruction.

Occupational objectives of high school students are seldom broad. They are usually a succession of narrow and transitory choices. Group instruction must be directed toward broad occupational objectives and individual experiences and instruction can be more specific.

Specialization in agriculture should come in the latter years of formal education. Each student should have a saleable skill when he either completes or drops out of full-time schooling.

The occupation of farming is not indicative of a particular socio-economic status, as are of the off-farm agricultural occupations. Teachers must be aware of the status of the particular occupations in the eyes of students and their parents when he is engaging in occupational guidance.

Job opportunities available beyond the immediate geographic location of the home county or school district must now be considered appropriate for students studying vocational agriculture. Students travel several miles from their homes to engage in off-farm agricultural occupations.

The best available occupational information must be given to students. The welfare of the student has highest priority in vocational agriculture. The teacher who does not keep the welfare of the student foremost will lose his effectiveness as a source of occupational information.

Expanded occupational choices available to students of vocational agriculture have these implications, and perhaps more, for the teacher of agriculture in carrying out his guidance role.

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